SŪRAH 70

Al-Ma ʿārij

(Ways of Ascent)

Prologue

This *sūrah* may be described as being part of the long, slow, yet accurate and profound treatment of the traces of *jāhiliyyah*, or ignorance, within the human soul. This was most evident as the Qur'ān was being revealed in Makkah but is true wherever *jāhiliyyah* reigns. There may be differences in different situations, but these are superficial affecting only appearances. Alternatively, we may say that this *sūrah* represents a round in the long, hard battle the Qur'ān fights within the human soul, going deep inside it to eradicate all lingering traces of *jāhiliyyah*. This battle is greater and longer lasting than the wars the Muslims later had to fight against their many enemies. Moreover, these traces are more persistent and harder in their resistance than the great forces that were marshalled against the Islamic message, or those which continue to be raised against it by different *jāhiliyyah* societies.

The major issue the *sūrah* focuses on is that of the hereafter and peoples requital for what they do during their lives on earth, particularly the punishment suffered by the unbelievers. In order to establish the truth of the hereafter, the *sūrah* speaks of how the human soul reacts to situations of hardship and comfort. Such reactions differ greatly between a believer and one who is devoid of faith. The *sūrah* also provides an outline of the believers' main features, their feelings and

behaviour, and it states how they deserve to be honoured. It also shows that the unbelievers are held in disregard by God, and gives a picture of the humiliation prepared for them. It is a humiliation the arrogant thoroughly deserve. Furthermore, the *sūrah* establishes the fact that values, standards and scales applied by God are different from those which human beings uphold.

The Qur'ān administered its long treatment and fought its hard battle within the human soul equipped with nothing other than its own powerful argument. It achieved its great victory within its followers even before it had a sword with which to defend those believers, let alone force its enemies into submission.

Whoever reads the Qur'ān bearing in mind the events that took place during the Prophet's lifetime will not fail to appreciate the overpowering effect the Qur'ān had on those people in Makkah until they willingly accepted its lead. We see the wide range of styles the Qur'ān employs. It may face the human soul with a great flood of inspiring proofs and powerful effects; or it may use a powerful tool that leaves nothing of the traces of ignorance without completely crushing it, or it may confront the human soul with something akin to a hard whip that kindles sensation so that the pain it inflicts is very hard to bear. It alternates its approaches between a calm friendly appeal that wins hearts, a loud terrifying outcry that warns of an impending and great danger, a clear presentation of powerful and irrefutable argument, and a raising of hopes with the prospect of an appealing outcome. At times the Qur'ān moves physically through the human soul, going along its alleyways and round its corners, shedding light on each of these. It, thus, puts these before man so that he looks at them, making him dislike certain aspects, feel ashamed at others, and alert to his own reactions, which he normally overlooked. The Qur'ān uses hundreds of such touches, appeals and influences in conducting its long battle and administrating its slow treatment. We can follow these as we read the Qur'ān and learn how it achieved its great victory against the stiff resistance the human soul put up from within. The present *sūrah* is one instalment of this Qur'ānic endeavour to establish the truth of the hereafter and other related truths.

The preceding *sūrah*, The Inevitable Truth, aimed to establish the same truth of the hereafter, but the methods employed in both *sūrahs*

are widely different. The line followed in the preceding *sūrah* aimed to show the great universal upheaval taking place on the Day of Judgement through terror-striking images such as: "*When the trumpet is sounded a single time, and the earth and mountains are lifted up and with one mighty crash are flattened, that which is certain to happen will on that day have come to pass. The sky will be rent asunder, for, it will have become frail on that day.*" (69: 13–16) It also depicts the awesome nature of that day in a majestic scene: "*The angels will stand on all its sides and, on that day, eight of them will bear aloft the Throne of your Lord.*" (69: 17) It leaves us shaken as it describes how everything is laid bare: "*On that day you shall be brought to judgement and none of your secrets will remain hidden.*" (69: 18) The images so drawn of punishment add to the terrifying effect of the *sūrah*. This starts with the way judgement is announced: "*Lay hold of him and shackle him, and burn him in the fire of hell, and then fasten him in a chain seventy cubits long.*" (69: 30–32) Such feelings of terror are vividly reflected in the outcries of lamentation voiced by those receiving such judgement: "*Would that I had never been shown my record and knew nothing of my account! Would that death had been the end of me!*" (69: 25–27)

In the present *sūrah*, awesomeness is felt in the features, thoughts and movements of the human soul, rather than the universe and its great scenery. Even in the scenes of the universe presented in this *sūrah*, the fear appears to be almost psychological. It is certainly not the most prominent aspect. Indeed, such fear takes hold of the human soul, and its extent is reflected in the panic it produces: "*On the day when the sky will be like molten lead, and the mountains like tufts of wool, when no friend will ask about his friend, though they may be within sight of one another. The guilty one will wish he could ransom himself from the suffering on that day by sacrificing his own children, his wife, his brother, the kinsfolk who gave him shelter, and all those on earth, if it could save him.*" (Verses 8–14)

In this *sūrah*, hell itself has a soul, feelings and consciousness of its own. Like living creatures, it plays a part in producing the fright effect: "*It is the raging fire that tears the skin away. It will claim all who turn their backs, and turn away from the truth, amass riches and hoard them.*" (Verses 15–18) Even the punishment and suffering is more psychological than physical: "*the day when they shall come in haste from their graves, as if*

rallying to a flag, with eyes downcast, with ignominy overwhelming them. Such is the day they have been promised." (Verses 43–44)

The images, scenes and impressions in this *sūrah* are different from those of the preceding one because of the difference in their general outlooks, despite the fact that they address the same central theme. The *sūrah* also provides images of human psychology in positive and adverse situations, and in cases of embracing faith or otherwise. This fits perfectly with its special psychological emphasis. It describes man in the following terms: "*Man is born with a restless disposition: when misfortune befalls him, he is fretful; and when good fortune comes his way, he grows tight-fisted. Not so those who pray.*" (Verses 19–22) The *sūrah* goes on to provide a picture of believers and their apparent and inner characteristics. This is in line with the general style of the *sūrah*: "*Not so those who pray, and always attend to their prayers; who give a due share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived; who believe in the Day of Judgement; who stand in fear of their Lord's punishment, for none may feel totally secure from their Lord's punishment; who guard their chastity except with those joined to them in marriage, or those whom they rightfully possess – for then, they are free of all blame, whereas those who seek to go beyond that [limit] are indeed transgressors; who are faithful to their trusts and to their pledges; who stand up for the truth when they bear witness; and who attend to their prayers without fail.*" (Verses 22–34)

The main drift in the preceding *sūrah* was to establish absolute seriousness in the question of faith. Hence the truth of the hereafter was one of several in the *sūrah*, alongside that of meting out swift punishment in this world to those who reject faith, and showing no leniency in the punishment of those who alter the principles of faith. By contrast, the drift in this *sūrah* is to establish the truth of the hereafter and the requital of all, as well as outlining the standards of such requital. This means that the hereafter is the main truth the *sūrah* speaks about. Hence, other truths mentioned here directly relate to the hereafter. An example of this is the difference in the way the *sūrah* mentions God's days and the reckoning of human days, and how God sees the Day of Judgement and how people see it: "*All the angels and the Spirit will ascend to Him, on a day the length of which is fifty thousand years. Therefore, endure all*

adversity with goodly patience. People think it to be far away, but We see it near at hand." (Verses 4–7) Another example is the difference affecting human psychology in the two cases of hardship and comfort when these are combined with faith or unfaith. Both are determinants of the type of requital received on the Day of Judgement. The *sūrah* also speaks of the unbelievers' arrogance as they entertain hopes of being admitted to gardens of bliss when they are of no importance in God's measure. They cannot evade His punishment. Thus we see that the *sūrah* is almost entirely devoted to the truth of the hereafter, which it aims to firmly establish in people's minds.

Another aspect of this *sūrah* is its particular musical rhythm that echoes its line of expression. The varied beat of the preceding *sūrah* responded to the change of the rhyme from one section to another, and the ambience of each. Here, the changes are wider in scope, because they incorporate the varied musical structure of the *sūrah*, not merely its varying rhyme. Here, every musical section is more complex and profound. This is particularly true of its first part where we have three melodies that differ in length and tune, but which share the same final beat. The first takes up verses 1–5, ending with a long '*a*' sound. This is repeated on two further occasions in the two short verses that follow. A second melody takes up three more verses, with the first two having different endings, but the third echoing the long '*a*' sound at the end. A third melody is composed of five verses, maintaining an '*eeh*' ending in the first four, but ending the fifth with another long '*a*'. Then we have six short verses, all ending with a long '*a*', but the rhyme in the first three is different from that of the other three. The remainder of the *sūrah* maintains an '*m*' or '*n*' ending preceded by a long '*e*' or '*o*'. The rhythm in the first section is both complex and profound. A sensitive ear will not fail to appreciate its sophistication, which is unfamiliar to those used to Arabic rhythm. However, the Qur'ānic style makes it easy to appreciate, moulding it in such a way as to overcome its unfamiliarity and so making it perfectly acceptable.

Al-Ma'ārij
(Ways of Ascent)

In the Name of God, the Lord of Grace, the Ever Merciful

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

An inquirer has asked about a suffering which is bound to befall (1)

سَأَلَ سَائِلٌ بِعَذَابٍ وَاقِعٍ ﴿١﴾

the unbelievers. Nothing can ward it off, (2)

لِّلْكَافِرِينَ لَيْسَ لَهُ دَافِعٌ ﴿٢﴾

as it comes from God, the Lord of the Ways of Ascent. (3)

مِّنَ اللَّهِ ذِي الْمَعَارِجِ ﴿٣﴾

All the angels and the Spirit will ascend to Him, on a day the length of which is fifty thousand years. (4)

تَعْرُجُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ وَالرُّوحُ إِلَيْهِ فِي يَوْمٍ كَانَ مِقْدَارُهُ خَمْسِينَ أَلْفَ سَنَةٍ ﴿٤﴾

Therefore, endure all adversity with goodly patience. (5)

فَاصْبِرْ صَبْرًا جَمِيلًا ﴿٥﴾

People think it to be far away, (6)

إِنَّهُمْ يَرَوْنَهُ بَعِيدًا ﴿٦﴾

but We see it near at hand. (7)

وَنَرَاهُ قَرِيبًا ﴿٧﴾

On the day when the sky will be like molten lead, (8)

يَوْمَ تَكُونُ السَّمَاءُ كَالْمُهْلِ ﴿٨﴾

and the mountains like tufts of wool, (9)

وَتَكُونُ الْجِبَالُ كَالْعِهْنِ ﴿٩﴾

when no friend will ask about his friend, (10)

وَلَا يَسْـَٔلُ حَمِيمٌ حَمِيمًا ﴿١٠﴾

though they may be within sight of one another. The guilty one will wish he could ransom himself from the suffering on that day by sacrificing his own children, (11)

يُبَصَّرُونَهُمْ ۚ يَوَدُّ ٱلْمُجْرِمُ لَوْ يَفْتَدِى مِنْ عَذَابِ يَوْمِئِذٍۭ بِبَنِيهِ ﴿١١﴾

his wife, his brother, (12)

وَصَٰحِبَتِهِۦ وَأَخِيهِ ﴿١٢﴾

the kinsfolk who gave him shelter, (13)

وَفَصِيلَتِهِ ٱلَّتِى تُـْٔوِيهِ ﴿١٣﴾

and all those on earth, if it could save him. (14)

وَمَن فِى ٱلْأَرْضِ جَمِيعًا ثُمَّ يُنجِيهِ ﴿١٤﴾

But no! It is the raging fire (15)

كَلَّآ ۖ إِنَّهَا لَظَىٰ ﴿١٥﴾

that tears the skin away. (16)

نَزَّاعَةً لِّلشَّوَىٰ ﴿١٦﴾

It will claim all who turn their backs, and turn away from the truth, (17)

تَدْعُوا۟ مَنْ أَدْبَرَ وَتَوَلَّىٰ ﴿١٧﴾

amass riches and hoard them. (18)

وَجَمَعَ فَأَوْعَىٰٓ ﴿١٨﴾

Man is born with a restless disposition: (19)

إِنَّ ٱلْإِنسَٰنَ خُلِقَ هَلُوعًا ﴿١٩﴾

when misfortune befalls him, he is fretful; (20)

إِذَا مَسَّهُ ٱلشَّرُّ جَزُوعًا ﴿٢٠﴾

and when good fortune comes his way, he grows tight-fisted. (21)

وَإِذَا مَسَّهُ ٱلْخَيْرُ مَنُوعًا ﴿٢١﴾

Not so those who pray, (22)

إِلَّا ٱلْمُصَلِّينَ ﴿٢٢﴾

and always attend to their prayers; (23)

ٱلَّذِينَ هُمْ عَلَىٰ صَلَاتِهِمْ دَآئِمُونَ ﴿٢٣﴾

who give a due share of their possessions (24)

وَٱلَّذِينَ فِىٓ أَمْوَٰلِهِمْ حَقٌّ مَّعْلُومٌ ﴿٢٤﴾

to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived; (25)

لِّلسَّآئِلِ وَٱلْمَحْرُومِ ﴿٢٥﴾

who believe in the Day of Judgement; (26)

وَٱلَّذِينَ يُصَدِّقُونَ بِيَوْمِ ٱلدِّينِ ﴿٢٦﴾

who stand in fear of their Lord's punishment, (27)

وَٱلَّذِينَ هُم مِّنْ عَذَابِ رَبِّهِم مُّشْفِقُونَ ﴿٢٧﴾

for none may feel totally secure from their Lord's punishment; (28)

إِنَّ عَذَابَ رَبِّهِمْ غَيْرُ مَأْمُونٍ ﴿٢٨﴾

who guard their chastity (29)

وَٱلَّذِينَ هُمْ لِفُرُوجِهِمْ حَٰفِظُونَ ﴿٢٩﴾

except with those joined to them in marriage, or those whom they rightfully possess – for then, they are free of all blame, (30)

إِلَّا عَلَىٰٓ أَزْوَٰجِهِمْ أَوْ مَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَٰنُهُمْ فَإِنَّهُمْ غَيْرُ مَلُومِينَ ﴿٣٠﴾

فَمَنِ ٱبْتَغَىٰ وَرَآءَ ذَٰلِكَ فَأُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ هُمُ ٱلْعَادُونَ ﴿٣١﴾

whereas those who seek to go beyond that [limit] are indeed transgressors; (31)

وَٱلَّذِينَ هُمْ لِأَمَٰنَٰتِهِمْ وَعَهْدِهِمْ رَٰعُونَ ﴿٣٢﴾

who are faithful to their trusts and to their pledges; (32)

وَٱلَّذِينَ هُم بِشَهَٰدَٰتِهِمْ قَآئِمُونَ ﴿٣٣﴾

who stand up for the truth when they bear witness; (33)

وَٱلَّذِينَ هُمْ عَلَىٰ صَلَاتِهِمْ يُحَافِظُونَ ﴿٣٤﴾

and who attend to their prayers without fail. (34)

أُو۟لَٰٓئِكَ فِى جَنَّٰتٍ مُّكْرَمُونَ ﴿٣٥﴾

They are the ones to be honoured in the gardens of paradise. (35)

فَمَالِ ٱلَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا۟ قِبَلَكَ مُهْطِعِينَ ﴿٣٦﴾

What is wrong with the unbelievers, that they run confusedly before you, (36)

عَنِ ٱلْيَمِينِ وَعَنِ ٱلشِّمَالِ عِزِينَ ﴿٣٧﴾

from the right and the left, in crowds? (37)

أَيَطْمَعُ كُلُّ ٱمْرِئٍ مِّنْهُمْ أَن يُدْخَلَ جَنَّةَ نَعِيمٍ ﴿٣٨﴾

Does every one of them hope to enter a garden of bliss? (38)

كَلَّآ ۖ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَٰهُم مِّمَّا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٣٩﴾

No! We have created them from the substance they know. (39)

فَلَآ أُقْسِمُ بِرَبِّ ٱلْمَشَٰرِقِ وَٱلْمَغَٰرِبِ إِنَّا لَقَٰدِرُونَ ﴿٤٠﴾

By the Lord of all star risings and settings, We certainly have the power (40)

to replace them with better people. There is nothing to prevent Us from doing so. (41)	عَلَىٰٓ أَن نُّبَدِّلَ خَيْرًا مِّنْهُمْ وَمَا نَحْنُ بِمَسْبُوقِينَ ﴿٤١﴾
Leave them to indulge in idle talk and play until they face the day they have been promised, (42)	فَذَرْهُمْ يَخُوضُوا۟ وَيَلْعَبُوا۟ حَتَّىٰ يُلَٰقُوا۟ يَوْمَهُمُ ٱلَّذِى يُوعَدُونَ ﴿٤٢﴾
the day when they shall come in haste from their graves, as if rallying to a flag, (43)	يَوْمَ يَخْرُجُونَ مِنَ ٱلْأَجْدَاثِ سِرَاعًا كَأَنَّهُمْ إِلَىٰ نُصُبٍ يُوفِضُونَ ﴿٤٣﴾
with eyes downcast, with ignominy overwhelming them. Such is the day they have been promised. (44)	خَٰشِعَةً أَبْصَٰرُهُمْ تَرْهَقُهُمْ ذِلَّةٌ ۚ ذَٰلِكَ ٱلْيَوْمُ ٱلَّذِى كَانُوا۟ يُوعَدُونَ ﴿٤٤﴾

The Truth of the Hereafter

An inquirer has asked about a suffering which is bound to befall the unbelievers. Nothing can ward it off, as it comes from God, the Lord of the Ways of Ascent. (Verses 1–3)

The very concept of the hereafter was very difficult for the Arab polytheists to understand. They strongly resisted it. In fact they received it with so much amazement that they denied it outright. They further challenged the Prophet, in various ways, to bring it about or to define its timing. A report attributed to Ibn 'Abbās mentions that the man who asked the question quoted in the first verse of the *sūrah* was al-Naḍr ibn al-Ḥārith. Another report quotes him as saying that the reference is to "the unbelievers' question about God's punishment, which is certain to engulf them."

Regardless of who the specific individual was the *sūrah* reports that someone asked about this punishment, indeed, sought to hasten it, and further confirms that it is inevitable because it has been determined by God and that it will soon come. It states that no one can prevent its happening or ward it off. Therefore, to question or hasten it is ill-advised. Moreover, this punishment is to befall the unbelievers, in total, which means that those who question it are included like every other unbeliever. It is administered by God, '*the Lord of the Ways of Ascent*'. This is an expression of highness, which is one of God's attributes mentioned in different ways in the Qur'ān, such as: "*High above all orders [of being] is He, the Lord of the Throne.*" (40: 15)

Having absolutely confirmed the inevitability of such punishment, the *sūrah* describes the day when it will take place, affirming that it will soon arrive. However, God's measure is different from mankind's:

> *All the angels and the Spirit will ascend to Him, on a day the length of which is fifty thousand years. Therefore, endure all adversity with goodly patience. People think it to be far away, but We see it near at hand.* (Verses 4–7)

Most probably the day to which these verses refer is the Day of Resurrection, as the *sūrah* almost defines it as so. On that day, the angels and the Spirit will ascend to God. The Spirit refers, in all probability, to the Angel Gabriel, since he is given this name elsewhere in the Qur'ān. He is specifically mentioned here, after the reference to all angels, because of his special status. Likewise, the angels' ascension on that day is highlighted so as to give it special importance; they will do so to fulfil what is assigned to them on that day. We do not know, nor are we required to know, the nature of their assignments, or how the angels ascend, or to where. All these are details that belong to the realm beyond the reach of our perception. To know them does not add to the statement's import. We have nothing to point to such information. Therefore, we do not attempt any further explanation. It is enough for us to reflect on the image to appreciate the great importance of that day when the angels and the Spirit are busy conducting their assigned tasks.

The statement that the length of that day is *fifty thousand years* may be an expression of very long duration as is customary in Arabic idiom, or it may express a true fact meaning that the day in question is equal to fifty thousand of our years despite its being just a single day. We can easily imagine this considering that our earth days represent the length of time the earth takes to revolve once in position. There are stars, however, which take thousands of our days to revolve once. This is not to say that this is what is meant here; we only state this to make it clear that the length of days can differ greatly.

If one of God's days is equal to fifty thousand of our years, then the punishment of the Day of Judgement is certainly close, according to God's measure, even though people may think it far away. Therefore, God tells His Messenger to be patient with them: "*People think it to be far away, but We see it near at hand.*" (Verses 6–7) The order to remain patient is part of the divine message's essence; it is required of every messenger and every believer. This is fundamentally necessary because the burden is heavy and the task hard. It is vitally important to keep the believers united and content, looking to their ultimate goal.

Goodly or 'beautiful' patience, to use a literal translation of the Qur'ānic term, is that type of patience coupled with a feeling of contentment and reassurance. It is undisturbed by displeasure, worry or doubt in the true promise. It is the type of patience shown by one who is certain of the outcome, content with God's will, appreciating His wisdom in the trying times he goes through, looking to Him in all situations. It is this type of goodly patience that is worthy of one who advocates the divine message. It is after all God's message calling on people to believe in Him. Its advocates have no personal interest in it; they seek no gain out of it. Whatever they suffer as a result is for God's sake, and whatever happens to it is by His will. Goodly patience, therefore, is the only attitude that fits properly with this truth.

God, who has bestowed this message from on high and has made this promise which the unbelievers hasten, determines events and their timings as He pleases, according to His overall plan for the universe. Human beings remain unaware of His will and plan; therefore, they hasten things. When time goes by without fulfilment of the promise, they begin to doubt. Worry may also be experienced by advocates of

the divine message themselves. They too may entertain thoughts and desires that the promise be fulfilled soon. Therefore, they are given the following instruction so that they may remain firm: "*Therefore, endure all adversity with goodly patience.*" (Verse 5) The address here is delivered to the Prophet so as to give him reassurance in the face of the opposition and rejection he faced. It also adds another truth here, highlighting the fact that God sees matters in a different way. He does not measure things by means of our small measures: "*People think it to be far away, but We see it near at hand.*" (Verses 6–7)

Celestial Events

> *On the day when the sky will be like molten lead, and the mountains like tufts of wool.* (Verses 8–9)

The Qur'ān mentions in several places that great celestial events will take place on that promised day, and as a result change will affect different celestial bodies in their positions and characteristics, as well as their inter-relations. One of these events changes the sky making it like molten lead, or molten metals generally as signified by the Arabic word used here, *al-muhl*. These statements should be reflected upon by physicists and astronomers. They suggest that most probably celestial bodies are composed of metals that have melted and taken gas form, which is a stage far beyond that of melting by excessive heat. It is possible that they will lose their heat on the Day of Judgement and cool down to a fluid stage, changing their present status. Elsewhere in the Qur'ān we have the following statement as a mark of the Day of Judgement: "*When the stars fall and disperse.*" (81: 2)

At any rate, this is only one possible explanation, which may or may not be worth further study by scientific researchers. As for us, we read the text and look at the awesome image painted, with the sky becoming like molten metal and the mountains like tufts of wool. We also contemplate what is beyond this image of frightening events that leave their marks on people in an unusual way which the Qur'ān accurately describes:

> *On the day when the sky will be like molten lead, and the mountains like tufts of wool, when no friend will ask about his friend, though*

> *they may be within sight of one another. The guilty one will wish he could ransom himself from the suffering on that day by sacrificing his own children, his wife, his brother, the kinsfolk who gave him shelter, and all those on earth, if it could save him.* (Verses 8–14)

People will be totally preoccupied in a way that does not allow anyone to look at anything other than his own situation. No thought will they give to anyone but themselves: "*When no friend will ask about his friend.*" The frightening event severs all bonds, locking everyone within their own problems. Yet they are made to see one another: "*though they may be within sight of one another,*" as if deliberately brought so. However, each will be totally absorbed with their own impending fate so that none will even think of enquiring about a friend or even asking a friend for help.

What about the guilty one? The terror he feels is so overwhelming that he wishes he could offer anything as a ransom so as to be spared the punishment awaiting him. He is ready to sacrifice his nearest and dearest, the very ones whom he so cared for that he would render any sacrifice for their sake. He is willing to sacrifice his own children, wife, brothers and all his kinsfolk who used to afford him shelter and protection. Indeed his eagerness to escape the approaching torment is so strong that he loses all feeling for anyone else. Indeed he would sacrifice everyone on earth if only he could be spared. What a frightening image of distress and panic!

In the midst of this situation, the guilty hears something that closes the door to any fleeting hope. Indeed, all will listen to what makes the situation abundantly clear:

> *But no! It is the raging fire that tears the skin away. It will claim all who turn their backs, and turn away from the truth, amass riches and hoard them.* (Verses 15–18)

There is absolutely no place for such impossible notions of escape, even though one would offer one's children, spouse, brothers, kinsfolk and everyone else in ransom. "*But no! It is the raging fire.*" (Verse 15) It rages on ready to burn, but it also "*tears the skin away.*" (Verse 16) It tears

the skin off both the face and head. Here, the fire is described as if it has a will of its own, deliberately taking part in inflicting punishment on the guilty. "*It will claim all who turn their backs, and turn away from the truth.*" (Verse 17) Those people who turned away when they were called upon to follow the truth embodied in the divine message are now called again. This time the caller is the raging fire, and this time they cannot turn away. In the past, they were busy amassing riches and hoarding them. Now their attentions cannot be diverted from responding to this call by the raging fire. Nor can they divert it from themselves, no matter what they offer in ransom.

Special emphasis is placed in this *sūrah*, as in the previous two *sūrahs*, on hindering good actions, discouraging the feeding of the needy and hoarding amassed riches. All these are placed side by side with disbelief and denying the divine message. Such repeated emphasis suggests that there were in that early period in Makkah people who combined greed and stinginess with disbelief and rejection. Everyone is warned against this and told of its consequences as a primary cause of punishment, second to disbelief in God and associating partners with Him.

The *sūrah* includes other references confirming this and showing some features of the prevailing environment Islam faced in Makkah. The whole social set up concentrated on amassing wealth through trade and usury. The Quraysh elders were the ones so engaged in such trade. They used to organize trade caravans in winter and summer. Their preoccupation with wealth meant that many were poor and deprived. Hence, the need for such repeated reminders and warnings. The Qur'ān continued to address these social ills, fighting greed and stinginess within people's souls, both before and after the conquest of Makkah. Anyone who follows the Qur'ānic verses addressing such social ills will appreciate this. These verses give clear warnings against usury, the wrongful taking of other people's money, devouring the wealth of orphans when they are still young, the oppression of orphan girls and forcibly marrying them to obtain their money, the ill-treatment of beggars, orphans and the needy generally. In all this, the Qur'ān launches a strong campaign against unfair practices, giving us at the same time a fair idea of the prevailing social environment. Moreover, these verses provide directives on how to rid the human soul, in all situations, of its gripping obsession with amassing wealth.

Between Good and Evil

The *sūrah* now depicts how man faces good and evil, in both situations of faith and unfaith. It also outlines the qualities of the believers and states their ultimate end in contrast to the fate of those who are guilty:

> *Man is born with a restless disposition: when misfortune befalls him, he is fretful; and when good fortune comes his way, he grows tight-fisted. Not so those who pray, and always attend to their prayers; who give a due share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived; who believe in the Day of Judgement; who stand in fear of their Lord's punishment, for none may feel totally secure from their Lord's punishment; who guard their chastity except with those joined to them in marriage, or those whom they rightfully possess – for then, they are free of all blame, whereas those who seek to go beyond that [limit] are indeed transgressors; who are faithful to their trusts and to their pledges; who stand up for the truth when they bear witness; and who attend to their prayers without fail. They are the ones to be honoured in the gardens of paradise.* (Verses 19–35)

The picture the Qur'ān draws of a man devoid of faith is remarkably accurate and expressive. Only faith can elevate him above such qualities. It is faith that gives him the bond of reassurance so that he does not panic when confronted with evil and is not stingy when his fortunes turn good: "*Man is born with a restless disposition: when misfortune befalls him, he is fretful; and when good fortune comes his way, he grows tight-fisted.*" (Verses 19–21)

Like the brushstrokes of a talented painter, every word in these verses draws a line delineating a human feature. Yet we have here only three very short verses, and these composed of only a small number of words. However, by the time they are finished, the picture drawn comes alive and man, with his distinctive and permanent features, is revealed. He has a restless disposition. He is fretful, feeling the pain of misfortune when it occurs. He panics, lest this should be permanent. He thinks the present moment will last forever. His worry soon imprisons him behind

the bars of the present moment and its misfortune so that he despairs of any change. Fear and worry tear him apart. How can he be otherwise when he does not have the steadying influence of faith and the hope it generates? When his fortunes turn good, he is stingy. He thinks that what he receives has been hard earned by his own efforts. Hence, he does not want others to take anything of it. He wants it all for himself. He becomes the prisoner of his own wealth. The truth is that he does not understand his actual role in getting whatever he earns. He does not look to receive from God what is better than all he has. How can he when his heart is devoid of faith? Thus, he is restless and worried in both situations. This is a very miserable picture of man when faith has no place in his heart.

Thus we see that faith is a very serious issue in man's life. It is not merely a word we utter, or worship rituals we offer. It is a state of mind and a code of living based on a complete value system with which to judge events and situations. Should a person lack such a steadying influence, he is likely to sway with the trend; he is in a permanent state of worry whatever fortune befalls him. By contrast, when his heart is enlightened by faith, he is content and reassured because he feels his bond with the One who conducts events and changes situations. He trusts to His will, feels His mercy, accepts His test, always looks to the relief of his hardship, ready to do good and be charitable knowing that whatever he gives away comes from Him, and whatever is spent for His sake will be rewarded both in this life and in the life to come. Faith is indeed a real gain, which believers receive in this present life before they are rewarded for it in the life to come. This gain is reflected in their state of comfort and reassurance throughout their life on earth.

The Exceptions

The *sūrah* now gives a detailed account of the believers who do not share the common human feature of restlessness and worry. "*Not so those who pray, and always attend to their prayers.*" (Verses 22–23) It is true that prayer is an essential Islamic duty providing the mark of faith. Yet it is much more than this: it is rather the means of contact with God Almighty and the sign of true servitude to Him. In prayer, the relative

positions of God and servant are clearly and specifically outlined. The *sūrah* adds here that believers attend to their prayers all the time and in all situations. It thus gives an image of permanence and stability. Their prayer is disrupted through negligence or laziness. It is a permanent bond. When the Prophet performed voluntary worship, he used to do so regularly. He also said: "The actions that please God most are the ones offered regularly, even though they may be small." [Related in all six anthologies of authentic *aḥādīth*.]

"*Who give a due share of their possessions to the one who asks [for help] and the one who is deprived.*" (Verses 24–25) This due share is *zakāt* in particular and other charitable donations of specified amounts. These are due, by right, from all believers. Perhaps this statement has a broader meaning too, signifying that believers assign a share of their wealth considering it to be due for such needy people. To do so is to rid oneself of stinginess and to rise above the desire to amass wealth. It also implies a recognition by the one who is well off within the community of believers of his duty towards the one who is deprived. When a believer accepts that the needy and the deprived have a rightful claim to a portion of his wealth, he acknowledges the grace God has bestowed on him and the bond he has with fellow human beings. It signifies freedom from greed and stinginess. Moreover, it guarantees mutual cooperation and care within the Muslim community. Thus, *zakāt* appears a duty with far-reaching significance on several levels, within oneself and in the life of the community.

"*Who believe in the Day of Judgement.*" (Verse 26) Drawing an essential but general outline of a believer's character, this quality is directly related to the *sūrah*'s main theme. To believe in the Day of Judgement is half of faith, having as it does a marked influence on one's life, with respect to both emotions and actions. The standard by which a believer in the Day of Judgement weighs up things, events, actions and life altogether is different from that of one who does not believe. Such a believer approaches matters and takes action looking up to heaven and thinking of the hereafter. He treats all events, good or bad, as preludes, while the results come later, in the life to come. Therefore, he looks at these with their expected results and evaluates

them on that basis. By contrast, the one who does not believe in the Day of Judgement looks at everything in the light of what he stands to gain from it in this present, short and limited life. Whatever action he takes is considered within the scope of life on earth. Hence, he weighs things, events and actions differently, arriving at very different conclusions. He is always worried and miserable because what he goes through in this his first life may not be reassuring, comfortable, fair or reasonable unless he adds to it what happens in the next stage, which is longer and broader. Hence, the one who does not take the hereafter into account will be unhappy or will cause unhappiness to those who are close to him. He cannot conceive of a higher level of life bringing him its clear rewards. Hence, believing in the Day of Judgement is half of faith, and it is on this belief that the Islamic code of living is based.

"*Who stand in fear of their Lord's punishment, for none may feel totally secure from their Lord's punishment.*" (Verses 27–28) This takes us a step further than the mere belief in the Day of Judgement. It adds clear sensitivity and alertness, as well as a feeling that despite one's worship one is falling short in the fulfilment of one's duty towards God. One fears to slip at any time and, as a result, deserve punishment. Therefore, one looks for God's help and protection. In his position as a Messenger of God, the Prophet was always on the alert, and in fear of God's punishment. He was convinced that his actions would not ensure his admittance into heaven unless God bestowed His grace on him. He said to his Companions in this respect: 'No one's actions will be enough to ensure their admittance into heaven.' They asked: 'Not even you, Messenger of God?' He said: 'Not even me, unless God bestows His grace on me.' [Related by al-Bukhārī, Muslim and al-Nasā'ī.]

"*None may feel totally secure from their Lord's punishment.*" (Verse 28) This statement suggests permanent awareness of God's punishment, because what incurs such punishment may occur at any moment. God does not require anything more than such awareness from people. Should they slip or succumb to weaknesses, His forgiveness and mercy are always available, and the door to repentance is always open. This is the middle course Islam charts between a total lack of awareness on the

one hand and excessive worry on the other. A believer's heart counters worry with hope, reassured of God's grace in all situations.

"*Who guard their chastity except with those joined to them in marriage, or those whom they rightfully possess – for then, they are free of all blame, whereas those who seek to go beyond that [limit] are indeed transgressors.*" (Verses 29–31) This ensures purity for oneself and the community. Islam builds a community based on purity but with a clear and open approach. It ensures that all important functions are fulfilled and all natural desires are met but without chaos or perversion. A legitimate family, living openly in its home is the unit of Islamic society where every child knows his father and none is ashamed of its birth. In this way, sexual relations are based on a proper, clean, legitimate and long-lasting bond with clear objectives. They seek to fulfil human and social duties other than the satisfaction of a mere physical urge. Hence, the Qur'ān states this quality of believers here, making it clear that sex is permitted only with spouses or with women who are rightfully possessed.

A word needs to be said here concerning this second category, which refers to slave women, if they happen to lawfully exist in a Muslim society. The only lawful reason for their existence is their having been taken prisoner during a war fought for God's cause, which is the only legitimate war from an Islamic point of view. Islam lays down a ruling concerning prisoners of war, which is outlined in a verse of *Sūrah* 47, Muḥammad: "*Now when you meet the unbelievers in battle, smite their necks. Then when you have thoroughly subdued them, bind them firmly. Thereafter, set them free either by an act of grace or against ransom, until war shall lay down its burden.*" (47: 4) Thus, the final ruling on prisoners of war is to set them free, either by an act of grace or against ransom. However, in some situations there may remain prisoners of war who are not set free. When such women slaves exist, sexual relations with them is permitted but only with their master. All the while, however, different ways of regaining their freedom are available to them. In fact, Islam provides many ways to ensure that slavery is abolished altogether. In all this, Islam is open, ensuring clean sexual relations in society. It does not leave such women prisoners of war to be the victims of

rape and filthy and exploitative relations, as often happens elsewhere in war situations. Nor does it put a false tag on the situation, calling such women free when they are in fact slaves.

"*Those who seek to go beyond that [limit] are indeed transgressors.*" (Verse 31) Thus Islam closes the door on all dirty sexual relations, keeping only these two open forms as legitimate. According to Islam, sex is a legitimate and clean function to which dirt may attach when it is practised in an illegitimate or deviant way.[1]

"*Who are faithful to their trusts and to their pledges.*" (Verse 32) This is one of the basic moral qualities on which Islamic society is founded. The honouring of trust and pledges begins, according to Islam, with honouring the great trust that God offered to the heavens, the earth and the mountains but they refused to accept it, fearing that they would not be able to fulfil its commitments. Man however accepted it. This is the trust of faith and the fulfilment of its requirements out of choice but without compulsion. It also involves honouring the first pledge taken from man's nature, before birth, when this nature testifies to the truth of God's oneness. Faithfulness to all trusts and pledges in worldly transactions is founded on honouring this first trust and this first pledge. Islam repeatedly emphasizes the importance of such faithfulness, to trust, confirming its role in building its society on solid foundations. It considers such faithfulness a distinctive feature of a believer, whereas the opposite quality distinguishes unbelievers. This is often repeated in the Qur'ān and the *Sunnah*, leaving no room for doubt as to the importance Islam attaches to faithfulness.

"*Who stand up for the truth when they bear witness.*" (Verse 33) To bear witness and give testimony is, according to Islam, the basis of the fulfilment of many rights. Indeed, preventing any transgression of the bounds set by God can only be ensured on such a basis. Hence, God has rightly placed strong emphasis on bearing witness, without hesitation, and testifying when a dispute needs to be adjudged. When bearing witness, the truth must be stated without distortion or twisting. Indeed, God has

1. For further treatment please refer to comments on *Sūrah* 23, in Volume XII, pp. 193–195, and on *Sūrah* 47, in Volume XV, pp. 393–401

made bearing witness an act done for Him so as to link it to obedience of Him. He gives us the instruction: "*Bear witness before God.*" (65: 2) Here, it is made a feature of believers. It is indeed one of the trusts that need to be fulfilled. It is given special mention in order to further emphasize its importance.

This list of believers' qualities started with attendance to prayers, and it now concludes with that same quality: "*And who attend to their prayers without fail.*" (Verse 34) The earlier reference to prayer mentioned that it is always attended to. Now, the point at issue is that it is done '*without fail*'. The two points are not the same. Here, the emphasis is on offering prayers on time, performing the obligatory part and adding the voluntary one, adhering to its form and spirit. Believers are neither negligent of this, nor are they careless. Needless to say, mentioning prayer as the first and the last of believers' distinctive qualities confirms the importance attached to it.

At this point, the fate of this group is stated: "*They are the ones to be honoured in the gardens of paradise.*" (Verse 35) This short verse combines an aspect of material enjoyment with a spiritual one. They are in gardens of paradise, but they are also honoured there. Thus, when they enjoy what is provided for them in paradise, they also enjoy being honoured for maintaining heir high moral standard.

The Unbelievers' Attitude

The *sūrah* then depicts a Makkan scene in which we see the unbelievers going hurriedly to where the Prophet was reading the Qur'ān. Once there, they would split into groups around him. The *sūrah* criticizes their hurrying and grouping when they had no intention of listening to or of heeding his advice:

> *What is wrong with the unbelievers, that they run confusedly before you, from the right and the left, in crowds?* (Verses 36–37)

There is implied sarcasm in the question. It describes their confused movement, with the Arabic expression adding a connotation of their

being led. The question wonders at their confusion: they move hurriedly, but without any intention of receiving guidance. They only want to learn what the Prophet says before splitting into small groups discussing how to resist what they have heard. What is wrong with them, then? "*Does every one of them hope to enter a garden of bliss?*" (Verse 38) How can they entertain such hopes when their behaviour leads only to hell, and not to heaven and its gardens of bliss? Do they think that they have a high position with God to ensure that they will enter heaven despite the fact that they disbelieve in Him, oppose the Prophet, scheme against Islam? They must imagine that they command very high value with God to achieve such elevation.

The answer is swift and decisive: "*No!*" It is delivered in the negative, implying contempt. "*We have created them from the substance they know.*" (Verse 39) They are aware that they have been created from a humble fluid they know well enough. There is an implicit, yet profound touch here, destroying all their pride and arrogance without using a single objectionable word. Yet the verse is so expressed that it depicts a state of utter humiliation and ignominy. How can they hope to be in heaven when they disbelieve and commit evil deeds, knowing from what substance they are created? In God's measure, they are too lowly to hold favour with Him. Why would He waive His law of administering justice to all according to their deeds just for them?

Confirming their unimportance and lowly status, the *sūrah* states that God is able to replace them with better creatures. Furthermore, they cannot escape the punishment their actions deserve:

> *By the Lord of all star risings and settings, We certainly have the power to replace them with better people. There is nothing to prevent Us from doing so.* (Verses 40–41)

The point at issue needs no oath, but the mention of risings and settings reflects God's greatness. These movements may refer to the rise risings and settings of the millions upon millions of stars in the universe. On the other hand, this may be a reference to sunrise and sunset over every point on our planet. At every moment, there is a

sunrise and a sunset, as the earth continues to revolve. Whichever the meaning intended, the mention of these risings and settings gives us a feeling of the greatness of the universe and the Almightiness of God who created the universe. Do those people, created from humble fluid, need an oath by the Lord of all star risings and settings to realize that He is able to create better people? Do they need an oath confirming that they cannot escape from Him?

The *sūrah* concludes with an address to the Prophet telling him to leave them to face their fate on that promised day. It shows their status then when they utterly distressed:

> *Leave them to indulge in idle talk and play until they face the day they have been promised, the day when they shall come in haste from their graves, as if rallying to a flag, with eyes downcast, with ignominy overwhelming them. Such is the day they have been promised.* (Verses 42–44)

This address implies a definite warning that should fill them with worry and anticipation. Indeed, the image describing them and their movements on that day should add intense fear. Moreover, it carries a clear element of sarcasm to parallel their pride and conceit. We see them coming out of their graves, hurrying on like people rallying to a flag or to a statue they worship. This is consistent with what they do in this life when they rally to flags and statues on festive days. Now they do the same, but there is no festivity on that day. Their description is completed by the statement, '*with ignominy overwhelming them.*' We can almost see their faces clearly through these words. We see them humiliated, overwhelmed by ignominy. They used to play and indulge in idle talk, but now they are exhausted, broken: "*Such is the day they have been promised.*" (Verse 44) That is the day they doubted would ever happen. Yet in their denial, they tried to hasten its arrival.

Thus the *sūrah* ends, with perfect harmony between its opening and end. It represents an episode in the long discussion of the major issue of resurrection, reckoning and requital, setting the Islamic concept of life in contrast with un-Islamic concepts.